



# Self-service

SCHOOLS NEED NOT JUST BE SERVING STUDENTS; THEY COULD BE CREATING THE TOOLS FOR STUDENTS TO SERVE THEMSELVES, SAYS **DAVID LOADER**.

Outside of schools, a powerful new business model is changing the way things are done. Instead of the emphasis being on a business serving its clients, we're now seeing businesses creating the tools for customers to serve themselves. Of course this has only been possible because of technology, but the fact that it has happened at all has led to a consequent change in the social contract between sellers and buyers – and that has implications for schools.

We've all been aware of this business model since the appearance of self-service supermarkets and petrol stations. We've been more or less happy to serve ourselves in these situations since they've given us perhaps a cheaper product and, in the case of the supermarket, more choice and a chance to browse. With the arrival of self-service or automatic teller machines (ATMs), customers happily became bank tellers not just because they had access 24 hours a day but because it gave them better control of their money. More recently, automatic checkout counters have appeared in supermarkets and customers are now happily checking out and paying for their own groceries.

If we want more evidence of the changing business model, consider these examples. YouTube, a company with a mere 67 employees, was sold to Google in 2006 for \$1.74 billion. The value of the company was created by its 20 million users who upload 65,000 videos daily, not its 67 employees.

Similarly, Wikipedia has been a huge success. Initially it failed, as Nupedia, when it relied on an internal editorial board. When it changed its business model so that thousands of volunteers from around the world do the writing and editing, it became a

success – and as accurate as traditional encyclopaedias.

On South Korea's OhmyNews site, which uses its readers to write 75 per cent of its content, readers have become the journalists. Danish toymaker Lego is encouraging young people not just to buy but to design Lego's new products. NASA, meanwhile, is persuading amateurs to help the professionals map the craters of Mars.

Advances in technology are helping big corporations to get closer to their customers and to add value by harnessing their creativity and labour. Successful corporations have to be careful, however, as this same technology is enabling individuals and small groups to disrupt and even replace them. All that's needed is a creative idea, a good website and some enabling computer code. As we've seen with Wikipedia, YouTube, OhmyNews, Lego and NASA, volunteers happily provide the creativity and labour for free.

So how does this new business model have relevance to schooling? At present schools operate under the old business model: curriculum makers prepare material for students and then this knowledge is transmitted to students by teachers in schools. The possibility that students are curriculum developers and teachers is not considered in any substantial way despite the fact that more than half of teenagers in the United States create content for the internet.

Why are schools not harnessing this creative energy? Why haven't we established a Wikipedia school, where knowledge is created and edited by students? Why have we not created a YouTube text book for students? Where are the student-created Lego tools for learning? Where is the school ATM

that provides the learning tools for students to serve themselves?

Such questions pose real intellectual and creative challenges for schools in their current form, but there's also a social challenge. A staggering 43 per cent of internet users are part of online communities and rate these online communities as positively as they rate their physical-world communities. Given that we only have access to 'real' schools for specific and limited times, from around 9am to 4pm, usually five days a week and around 42 weeks a year, why are schools ignoring the potential of the online communities for social networking for learning?

In the business world, amateurs are capturing the space that was previously the domain of professionals, and clients are equal participants in the creative development of products, not just passive consumers of the work of others. Why then in schools are we restricted to a business model, derived from our past industrial history, of teachers as distinct from learners, students taught in batches called classes, and a fixed curriculum that is deemed to be appropriate for all?

For schools to be relevant, they need a new business model. Students can be more than passive consumers of knowledge; they can become creators of knowledge. Schools need not just be serving students; they could be creating the tools for students to serve themselves. **1**

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